

Washington, D.C. An effort to include an emergency preparedness program for socially and economically disadvantaged communities, into the FY'06 Homeland Security Appropriation's bill was defeated by a party line vote of 11 to 7 in the Conference Committee. Congressman Sanford Bishop (GA-02), who led the effort and who has long championed the issue, gave the following statement:

"I am disappointed in my Republican colleagues' inability to learn anything from Hurricane Katrina. Combined with the devastation of Hurricane Rita, these storms represent the worst natural disaster in the history of our nation and have opened the eyes of Americans to the crisis of poverty in the United States. Yet, somehow, my Republican colleagues remain oblivious.

"Regardless of which state, local or federal officials, governments or even political parties we try to blame for the catastrophe that was the response to hurricane Katrina, you only needed to turn on the television to understand that the real culprit was our persistence in turning a blind eye to our nation's poor. Driven from anonymity by the flood waters of Lake Pontchartrain, these brave men, women and children taught us that we can not continue to act as if that they do not exist.

"We learned the hard way that evacuation plans do not work if people do not have the means to follow them. We learned that we must prepare all communities—not just the middle class and above—for disaster. We can not afford to learn the hard way again.

"Over a decade ago, former Congresswoman Carrie Meeks raised the issue of emergency preparedness in minority and disadvantaged communities, after her Florida district was ravaged by hurricanes. I began lobbying for the issue, in 1994, when, as a new Congressman, I saw first hand the devastation that Hurricane Alberto inflicted, when floods drove my constituents from their homes in Albany, Newton, Bainbridge, Americus, Montezuma and Macon, Georgia.

"Every year, since 2002, we have included language in first, the VA HUD Appropriations bill, and then, the Homeland Security Appropriations bill, that has directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to 'research the status of emergency preparedness and disaster response awareness in African American and Hispanic households.' Yet, every year our instructions have gone virtually ignored. Imagine how things could have been different, if FEMA had paid attention.

"Today, I asked my colleagues in the Homeland Security Conference Committee to correct this wrong by implementing and funding a program to increase disaster preparedness in disadvantaged communities. Yet, my pleas were again ignored, as the measure was voted down along party lines.

"If we do not take action now, when our nation is rallying for those in need, my question is: when will we take action? If in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we have not learned the pitfalls of ignoring the issue of poverty, when will we learn them? If we can not put aside small-minded partisanship in the wake of our nation's worst natural disaster, when will we ever put it aside?"